

Phantom

by

Ashley Banks

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Introduction

My first introduction to *The Phantom of the Opera* was seeing Andrew Lloyd Weber's musical, and I was enthralled by the music and romantic storyline. The next day I checked out Gaston Leroux's novel from my middle school's library. I was expecting a tale of romance and was disappointed to find a mystery novel instead. Years later, I reread the book as an adult and re-watched the musical.

This time, however, I was less enchanted by the portrayal of the titular Phantom's obsession with a young soprano as something romantic. I also read *Phantom* by Susan Kay, a popular novel that imagines what the Phantom's early life would have been like and tells the events of the Leroux novel from his perspective. Kay's version of the story offers one chapter from the perspective of Christine, the object of the Phantom's desire.

Kay is generous and sympathetic towards the Phantom, painting him as a kind-hearted, misunderstood victim of society, while Christine is portrayed as a simple-minded child. In observing Phantom fandom communities online, I noticed that there still seems to be a large amount of people who sympathize with the Phantom and wish that Christine had picked him over Raoul, her wealthy childhood sweetheart that comes to her rescue. The Phantom is often portrayed as a sympathetic character whose mistreatment by society led him down a dark path, but that perspective feels very much like the sympathy given to mass shooters as "misunderstood loners."

After listening to the cast recording of *SIX*, a musical that has the six wives of Henry VIII telling their stories in a bid to become the lead singer of their Spice Girls-esque girl group, I was inspired. Henry VIII wanted to be known as a great ruler, but ultimately went down in history because of his many wives. They are the real stars of

the show and putting them in the spotlight focuses on the victims' stories instead of their abuser's story. I wanted to tell Christine's story from her perspective, not that of her obsessive stalker or long-lost childhood sweetheart.

Years ago, after discovering *The Phantom of the Opera* for the first time, I got involved in online roleplaying groups on Xanga, an online blogging platform, based on the story. Everyone involved would have a blog for their character and interact with each other through comments and on AIM instant messenger. The most coveted roles to play were obviously that of Christine and the Phantom. In these groups, the story would be re-enacted in any way that the players desired but would almost always involve Christine staying with the Phantom and falling in love with him. If the role of Christine was taken and you had to play as a random ballet girl, you would still most likely be vying for the attention of the Phantom. I've recently seen similar roleplaying groups formed on Instagram as well, proving that the desire to cast yourself as your favorite character in a story is still alive in the next generation.

Remembering this experience is what set me down the path into making this story through interactive fiction. Doing so gives the reader the power to influence the direction of the story. The climax of *The Phantom of the Opera* is about Christine making a choice: does she stay with the Phantom or go with her childhood sweetheart? That choice has remained a controversial one within the fandom, and I liked the idea of the reader getting to choose the ending that they wanted to see.

Going into this project, I couldn't help but feel apprehensive about my capstone for my master's degree essentially being a work of fan fiction. While fan fiction is certainly a valid form of writing, there are still negative connotations attached. In the

early 2000s, I read my fair share of Phantom fan fiction, most of which focused on the Phantom and Christine having a romantic relationship. I knew that it could be very easy for these kinds of projects to cross the line and become cringeworthy.

Adaptations of *The Phantom of the Opera* often seem to utilize a “like parent, like spouse” trope when it comes to the Phantom and Christine. In the 90s television series starring Charles Dance, the Phantom’s obsession with Christine stems from her resemblance to his dead mother. In Lloyd Weber’s musical, Christine conflates the Phantom with her dead father. This trope is especially gross when you consider that there is enough of an age gap between the two that they could be father and daughter.

I tried to avoid these tropes when writing. I modernized the setting of the story to the present day because I felt that in doing so it would help to underscore the true threat of the Phantom. I hadn’t seen a modern-day adaptation of the story yet, so I thought it would be interesting to explore. I also wanted to make Christine’s connection with the Phantom more about her grief over her father’s death than about having a romantic connection with him.

In the original story and in some adaptations that I’ve seen, the Phantom abducts Christine and lets her go before abducting her again towards the end. I originally included a similar storyline, but I ended up editing it out so that he just kidnaps her once. It felt unrealistic that an abductor would kidnap someone and then let them go, and it slowed the plot down. I wanted to increase the creepiness of the Phantom and decrease the romanticism around him. The Phantom releasing Christine aides in making him seem like too much of a sympathetic character and helps to humanize him. Additionally, making this change helps with the pacing of the story.

The main storyline is similar to the original story where Christine gets abducted by the Phantom and has to choose whether or not to marry him to save Raoul, who has come to rescue her. I gave the reader three options: stay with the Phantom, escape with Raoul, or leave them both behind and go on her own. This gives every reader the opportunity to get the ending they want to see.

To this main storyline, I added a different path that involves Christine running away from the Phantom after he abducts her. I thought it would be a realistic reaction to have after being abducted. It also gives Christine the opportunity to take action in the story, as opposed to just accepting her fate. In this storyline, I added a struggle between Christine and the Phantom and tried to leave it ambiguous as to whether he made it out of the struggle alive.

I wanted the project to have a high level of repeatability, so I included story paths that veered away from the original story. One of the storylines I included that differed from the source material involves the Phantom not being real at all, but rather a manifestation of her grief that she must come to terms with. I wanted this storyline to have a similar feeling to the 2018 film *Unsane*, where a woman trying to escape a stalker unwittingly gets committed to a mental hospital where her stalker works. Reality is questioned throughout the film, and that is what I was hoping to accomplish. Is the voice she's hearing real or is it all in her head?

This plotline also has Christine visiting her father's grave, which I liked as a nod to one of my favorite moments in the song "Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again," which also has Christine dealing with her father's death.

The second new story path I added also has a similar theme of questioning reality, but instead has Raoul as the man behind the voice manipulating her into going to him for comfort. I watched a lot of true crime documentaries and was intrigued by a case where a man pretended to stalk his high school ex-girlfriend to win her back. He would send her threatening texts from a different number, and disguise himself and hang around her house when she was home alone. Understandably frightened by this, the girl would confide her fears in her ex, and he would comfort her. I liked the idea that the supposed good guy wasn't really all that he seems to be.

Given my familiarity with the source material and its various adaptations, when I first started the project, it didn't immediately occur to me that some readers might not know the original story. For example, the inciting incident is when Christine hears a strange voice in her dressing room and potentially believes it to be the "Angel of Music" that her father promised on his deathbed to send to her to aid her singing. If a reader is unfamiliar with the story, they would probably be confused as to why someone would hear a man's voice in their private dressing room and jump to a supernatural conclusion. To help counteract this, I added biographies of the characters and their relationships with Christine to help give context to the story.

During my time in the MAPW, I primarily wrote screenplays and poetry. When starting this project, I looked at it similarly to outlining a screenplay. When first thinking about how to approach this project, I looked at it almost as though it were a script. I even briefly considered trying to make it an interactive film like Netflix's *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, but I quickly realized that something of that caliber would be over my head.

During my second semester in the fall of 2019, I enrolled in PRWR 6850, Web Content Development. In this class, I learned about different ways stories could be told online and was first introduced to the concept of interactive fiction. In the spring of 2020, I took PRWR 6550, Document Design and Desktop Publishing. One of our projects was to redesign a book. While browsing through titles in the public domain, I stumbled across *The Phantom of the Opera* and remembered how much I loved the story. While working on that project, I reread the book and was surprised at how differently I viewed the story as an adult. In that project, I began to think about how the story could be retold through a modern lens. However, it wasn't until the following fall that the project began to take shape. In the fall of 2020, I enrolled in PRWR 6440, Professional and Academic Editing. Our final project was a piece of electronic literature. I knew immediately that this electronic literature project would be how I retold the story. I referred back to textbooks from these classes that focused on interactive fiction to guide me on how to approach this project, such as Carolyn Handler Miller's *Digital Storytelling*, which covered topics on interactive media and how it is structured and developed across different platforms.

To begin, I wrote down the major plot points that I wanted to include for each story path. I knew that I wanted them to all start from the same point and have the same inciting incident where Christine hears a voice in her dressing room. From there, the story branches out into different directions depending on what choices the reader makes.

Going from writing screenplays to writing interactive fiction was also a challenge. The styles of writing are very different and getting used to the change was difficult. Writing dialogue was particularly challenging given that the formatting is so different. I

wrote in second person perspective so that the reader would take on the role of the protagonist. No matter how hard I tried, writing in second person always felt stiff and awkward. I could envision the scenes in my head, but they always seemed to come out wrong when written in second person. This also made character development a challenge. With so many different storylines and plot directions, making the character of Christine feel consistent throughout was difficult. When writing a screenplay, the first thing I do is write biographies for each character. Even if I don't use all of the information in the story, it helps to inform who the character is as I write the story. I tried using this method when writing Christine but still struggled with translating the character into a second person perspective.

This project was my first experience using Twine, an online tool for creating interactive stories. Stories are laid out on a grid similar to an outline with multiple passages. Text links in the passages create the interactive element. The site offers different story formats that can be customized with HTML, CSS, and JavaScript, depending on the user's familiarity with them. Some formats are aimed more so at beginners without much coding knowledge, like the Harlowe format. When I first drafted the project, this was the format I used. This is the default format when starting a new project in Twine, and it is easy and straightforward to use. During my undergraduate studies, I took some web design courses and learned rudimentary HTML and CSS. Even with my limited skill set, I was able to customize the project easily.

However, while the site might have been aesthetically pleasing, it lacked in accessibility and user-friendly features. I had learned about accessibility in both my Professional and Academic Editing class and Web Content Development class. Caught

up in the novelty of editing the appearance of my project, however, those lessons slipped my mind. I had originally drafted the project with a black background with white text, and a background image of an empty theater stage which I felt nicely reflected the story's dark tone. However, after receiving notes from my advisors that the contrast could be difficult to read, I knew that I needed to make changes. What good is a story that is aesthetically pleasing but impossible to read?

I knew that I wanted to have a way for a reader to choose between a "light" and "dark" mode, like what is offered on most smartphones and laptops where the light mode would show the story with black text on a white background, and dark mode would show the inverse. Having both options would also allow me to keep my original aesthetic vision for the project while offering an alternative for readers with visual challenges.

After many hours spent trying to make the Harlowe version of my project more accessible, I finally relented and changed the story format altogether. I switched to Twine's Sugarcube format, an older format that allows more customization with JavaScript and HTML/CSS. While at first, I was reluctant to make the switch, I am ultimately glad I did. Doing so allowed me to make the project more accessible and customizable.

Making the change was not without challenges. Figuring out how to make the changes I wanted with this format was difficult given my lack of knowledge of coding and programming. Ideally, I would also like to have added some sort of journal or diary to document the character's inner world. I had envisioned it being fixed to the sidebar and something that players could return to throughout the game. After some internet

research, I found that the most common way of achieving something like this in Twine seemed to be with variables, which would control what could be seen in a passage depending on certain factors. Even though it seemed simple, I tried numerous times but could not get it to work. I also considered making each entry a separate passage, but I really wanted the functionality of something that would be pinned to the sidebar and always accessible.

Another aspect that I would have liked more control over is the visual appeal of the project. Aesthetically, this project still leaves lots to be desired. When the project was in the Harlowe format, I used a background of a theater stage set against black text boxes. When I first added the background to the SugarCube version, it showed up with transparent passages, making the text impossible to read. I no longer liked the way the background looked, so I removed it altogether.

While the simplicity is nice and easy to read, I can't help but feel that it looks a little plain. I like the functionality that this story format offers, but I'm limited by my own lack of skills in HTML/CSS, JavaScript, and graphic design as to how I'm able to make it look. Ideally, moving forward, I would add more visual elements.

However, despite all of that, I am happy to have made the change. I was finally able to achieve a switchable "light" and "dark" mode with the help of a kind stranger on Discord who walked me through the code step-by-step. The selection is remembered in your browser, so the reader doesn't have to keep selecting their preference if they leave and return later.

In addition to the light and dark mode, I also found a code for buttons that allow the reader to increase and decrease the font size. I switched the font from a serif to a

sans serif, which is easy to read and also reflects the more modern telling of the story. Additionally, I tested the project to make sure it was compatible with screen readers. After making these additions, my project is not only easier to read but also more accessible to a wider audience.

One feature in the SugarCube format that I was pleasantly surprised by was the “saves” and “restart” buttons that were automatically on the sidebar. Having the ability for a reader to save their place in the story and come back to it later was something that I had wanted but didn’t know how to achieve originally. Personally, I tend to have a shorter attention span when it comes to reading things online so having this option is great.

Going forward, I would like to take the time to learn more coding and graphic design to bring the project to where I want it to be. A problem I frequently ran into was having an idea of how I wanted it to look or function, but my attempts at executing those ideas were lackluster at best.

Overall, although I did not accomplish all my original goals with this project, I am ultimately pleased with the outcome and the direction that I am headed in with it. When I started my graduate program, I had never heard of interactive fiction. My time in the MAPW exposed me to new ways of writing and expanded my horizons creatively. This project has been a culmination of that expansion. I was pushed outside of my comfort zone, and ultimately, I feel that I am a better writer because of it.

References

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